

Last Chance Ranch Stabilization Project — 2000-2001

Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



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Introduction

The Last Chance Ranch is located in the northwest corner of Nevada in the rugged, high desert and tableland terrain that characterizes the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). The ranch buildings are situated at a spring in the narrow southern end of a valley. Basalt rimrock flanks the valley on the east and west. To the south is a shallow basin where three intermittent streams join to form a seasonal marsh, before flowing north past the Last Chance Ranch. The ranch is located in Washoe County, Nevada (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. Last Chance Ranch, view to NE, ca. 1950.

The Last Chance Ranch was established by George B. Hapgood. In 1882 Hapgood initially established a ranch near Calcutta Lake, about five miles west of Last Chance Ranch. The Last Chance Ranch was acquired under the terms of the Nevada State Patent, similar to the Homestead Act. The name "Last Chance" was apparently bestowed on the ranch because Hapgood was convinced this was his last opportunity to establish a successful livestock operation. Hapgood built a small sod house, barn, and root cellar. A few years later he built a 1½ story, wood frame house to serve as a bunkhouse for his summer ranch hands (Figures 2 and 3).

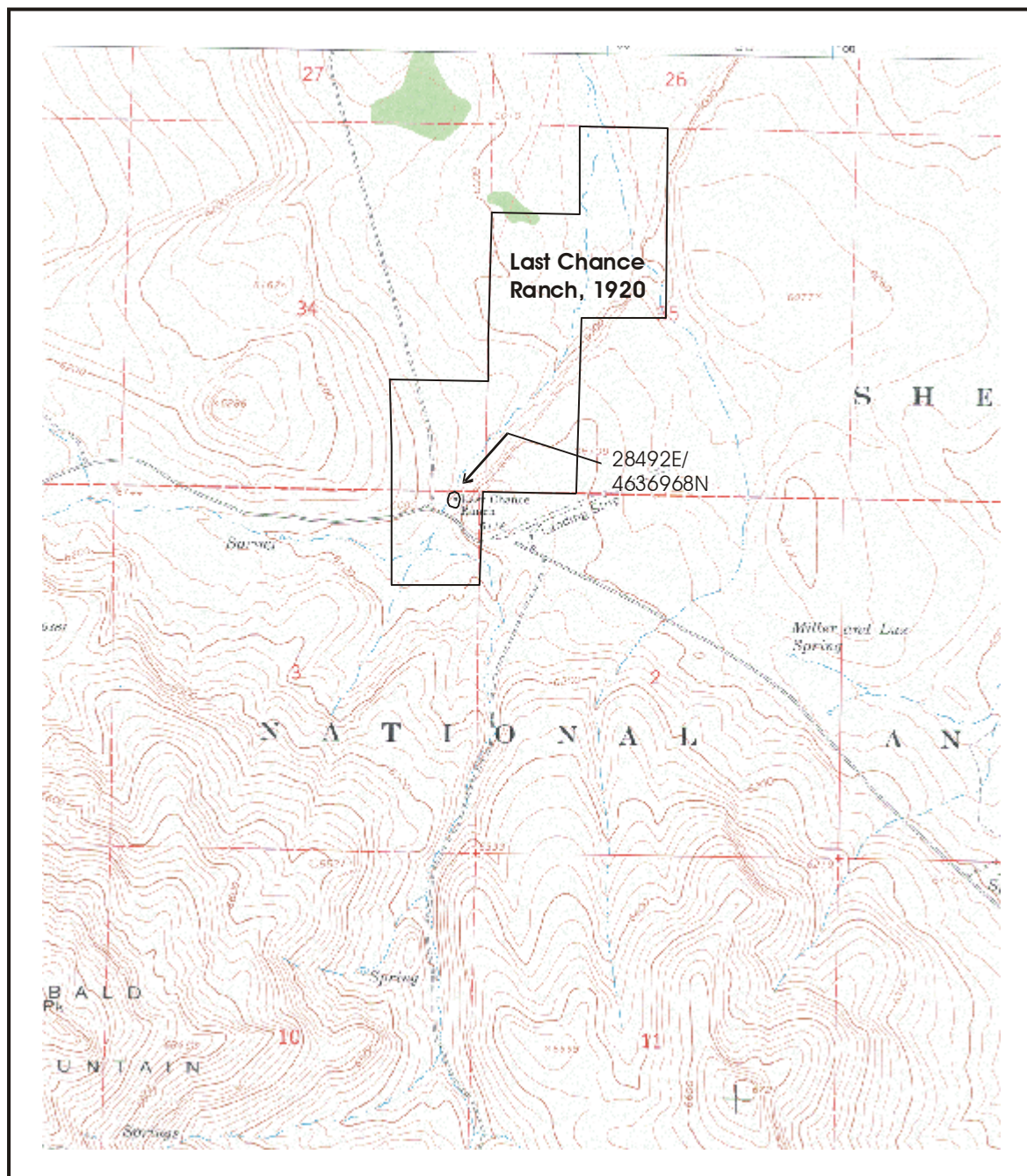


Figure 2. Bald Mtn., USGS 7.5' topographic quadrangle map with Last Chance Ranch location.

In about 1910 Hapgood expanded the house with a stone addition. It is not known why he decided to change the primary building material from wood to stone. One could speculate that the vertical plank walls, lacking any insulation, did not withstand the bitter cold winters.

Following a general pattern for this area, ranchers usually acquire property around springs. In the dry, high desert landscape, owning the springs controlled the grazing potential. In the mid-1920s a period of drought commenced and the Hapgood family fortunes began to reverse.



Figure 3. Last Chance Ranch with addition under construction, ca. 1910.
(From Pinger 1985:31).

Also in the 1920s a movement had begun to conserve the Nation's wildlife that were threatened with extinction because of man's over development of the land. E.R. Sans, Nevada Superintendent of predatory animal control for the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey traveled to northwest Nevada and realized that the antelope were in critical condition because of declining range land and over-grazing by cattle. In May of 1925, Sans set up a temporary headquarters at the Last Chance Ranch. Sans believed that the ranch with its extensive land base and several major springs fit the requirements for an antelope refuge.

In 1927, George Hapgood died, leaving the ranch property to his two sons. The family was divided regarding the status of the ranch. But with a large debt to be paid and lack of interest in stock raising by one of the sons, E. R. Sans was able to convince the brothers to sell.

Sheldon NWR was established in 1929 and the Last Chance Ranch served as the first office and residence until 1934. The first manager of the refuge was Ernest J. Greenwalt. Greenwalt moved into the Last Chance Ranch which served as his quarters and office for about five years, until the new headquarters were completed in 1934. Greenwalt's son, Lynn, spent the first several years of his life here, and later became the Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In 2000 and 2001 the FWS rehabilitated the Last Chance Ranch house which was deteriorating at an alarming rate (Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 4. Last Chance Ranch, 2000.



Figure 5. Last Chance Ranch, after stabilization, 2001.